

# RURAL POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

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## Response to Consultation

### Key points

- The main challenges facing rural communities in Northern Ireland over the next 5 years including Housing.
- The main opportunities facing rural communities in Northern Ireland over the next 5 years including Housing.
- Thematic Pillars supporting the Framework need to include Housing.

**Date 6 September 2021**



## ABOUT NIFHA

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations, formed in 1977, is the representative body for Northern Ireland's 20 registered housing associations.

Our members are all not-for-profit organisations. Together, supported by the Department for Communities and the Housing Executive, they provide just under 56,000 social and affordable homes.

Housing associations access private finance to effectively double the number of homes they could build with government housing association grant alone.

Housing associations also deliver high quality care and support to help people stay as independent as possible. Working in partnership with other organisations, they also invest millions each year in community services and facilities.

Our sector employs more than 3,200 people and manages housing assets worth £4.5 bn.

NIFHA welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland.

## PART 1: SETTING THE CONTEXT

A Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland provides rural communities an opportunity to review the approach to rural policy and what is needed to support rural communities within the context of the following main strategic drivers:

- The impact of COVID-19 on rural communities, in particular the need for flexibility to respond quickly to emerging needs.
- Green Growth including the need for access to nature whilst ensuring sustainability in a post COVID-19 era.
- Opportunities for new ways of working and funding post priority 6 funding under EU Rural Development Programme.
- The priorities set out in the draft Programme for Government (PfG); and
- The New Decade, New Approach Deal.

The Rural Policy Framework for NI is ambitious in regard to both its scope and remit, recognising rural areas as places of opportunity. The Framework sets a challenging vision and aim for rural NI, complementing any future Green Growth Strategy and focusing on sustainability.

The Framework has also considered City and Regional Growth Deals. Whilst a living document, in so far as possible, consideration has been given to current emerging needs impacting on rural areas, such as the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Our rural areas and rural communities make an important contribution to the social and economic life of the region, and it is important that governments, rural communities, and the voluntary and community sector continue to work together to help sustain rural communities; support balanced regional growth; and to help tackle rural disadvantage.

DAERA's vision is: *Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape, valued by everyone.*

Overarching Aim is: *To create a sustainable rural community where people want to live, work, and be active.*

## PART 2: CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

1. NIFHA agree that the proposed overarching aim ‘To create a sustainable rural community where people want to live, work, **thrive** and be active and **supported**’ for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland is appropriate.

However, we suggest the addition of the words in red to strengthen the overarching aim as it is important to reflect need to have economically viable communities and also communities that older and disabled groups can receive supports to stay resident within their communities.

2. We agree that the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) approach should continue under the wider umbrella of the Rural Policy Framework.

Rural communities have unique needs and often “hidden” homelessness and poverty issues, and barriers to access good essential services such as lack of public transport and social housing provision.

3. Listed below are the 5 main challenges we feel are facing rural communities in Northern Ireland over the next 5 years ranked from 1 the most significant to 5 the least significant. However, it is also felt the challenges in red are essential.

Rating	Description of challenges
1	Access to public services (e.g., health, education, and social services).
	<b>Availability of appropriate and adequate community facilities/supports for different age groups.</b>
2	Broadband/mobile phone connectivity.
3	Changing demographics (e.g., ageing population, new communities, and retention of young people in rural areas).
5	Climate change and environmental sustainability.
4	Future of farming/agri-food sector. Jobs and business.
	Managing tourism in a sustainable way.
	<b>Transport and infrastructure.</b>

In addition to the challenges listed above we feel the following need to be considered-

- Access to good quality, affordable housing in areas of need to help meet the needs of young families, elderly, and those with mobility issues in rural communities.
- Lack of affordable housing options in rural areas meaning people have to move away from their local communities, which in turn impacts on schools and local businesses etc
- Need to consider the housing and wider requirements of an ageing population in rural communities e.g., access to health, social services etc. to promote independent living and tackle poverty issues.
- Availability of sites which are suitable for rural housing developments and identifying where there is demand (which is often hidden) in rural communities.
- Impact of cost of required infrastructure on feasibility of small rural sites

- Access to social housing and low-cost home ownership, in mixed tenure environment i.e., social, affordable, and private homes. There are challenges for popular rural coastal communities who are being pushed out of the market by 2nd homes/tourism accommodation.

4. The main opportunities facing rural communities in Northern Ireland over the next 5 years ranked from 1 the most significant to 5 the least significant.

Rating	Description of Opportunity
5	Diversification within farming/agri-food sector. Economic development of markets (local, national, and international) and sectors (both non-traditional and emerging).
	Enabling communities (e.g., supporting local leadership, groups, and volunteers, enhancing community amenities).
	Enterprise and employment: expanding opportunities (e.g., Social Enterprise, apprenticeships, supporting entrepreneurs).
2	Joined-up approach from Government on delivering for rural communities in Northern Ireland.
1	Optimisation of digital connectivity (e.g., Broadband, and emerging technologies) (e.g., remote working, research, development and innovation, and future jobs).
3	Revitalisation of towns and villages.
4	Sustainable development and climate adaptation (e.g., renewable energy).
	Tourism: expansion of options including heritage, recreation, and activity tourism.
	Transport infrastructure and services.

The revitalisation of towns and villages has been selected with the thought that the opportunities in red would form part of this revitalisation.

5. Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship: To create a rural society where innovation and entrepreneurship flourish.

We agree that Thematic Pillar 1 is appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland. This Pillar is vital in injecting much needed diversification for farming communities and enabling alternative uses of land to be considered.

b. We agree that the three priority areas for intervention outlined below supporting Thematic Pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland.

- Develop a culture of rural innovation.
- Raise awareness, build capacity and capability to engage in rural entrepreneurship and innovation
- Invest in and develop our rural economy

6. Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism: To maximise the contribution that sustainable rural tourism makes to rural society and to the wider economy and environment.

We agree that Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism is appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland. There is a need for sensitive management and restriction of land use for social housing and/or low-cost home ownership housing linked to a local lettings/accessibility policy to enable communities to be sustained.

b. We agree that the four priority areas for intervention outlined below supporting Thematic Pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland.

- Encourage and support the delivery of compelling year-round, authentic visitor products and experiences of a quality that will provide international stand out for Northern Ireland.
- Support a rural tourism sector that is commercially focused and achieves sustainable levels of growth and prosperity.
- Facilitate welcoming and supportive rural communities to play an enhanced role in developing and managing tourism in their locality, thereby strengthening, benefitting, and enriching local areas.
- Recognise, value, protect and enhance Northern Ireland's natural, cultural, and historic built environment as the cornerstone of its rural tourism.

7. Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing: To reduce loneliness and social exclusion in rural areas, to minimise the impacts of rural isolation and to promote the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers.

We agree that Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing is appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland.

b. We agree that the five priority areas for intervention outlined below supporting Thematic Pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland.

- Champion awareness and understanding of rural social exclusion, isolation, and loneliness
- Support a rural dimension within the work of other organisations which are promoting positive health and wellbeing, addressing social exclusion, isolation and loneliness and build the capacity of rural organisations and people to develop their activities in this area.
- Establish effective approaches to reducing loneliness and social exclusion in rural areas, to minimise the impacts of social isolation and to promote the health and wellbeing of rural dwellers.
- Sustain the future viability of villages as social and economic centres.
- Support the strategic development of existing rural community assets as places where people can meet, interact, access services and enhance their health and wellbeing.

It is widely accepted that without good secure homes the impact on health and wellbeing is greatly compounded. Enablers to support more provision of social housing should be a priority in mixed tenure residential development which combines a range of tenure options, i.e., social, affordable, and private.

8. Thematic Pillar 4: Employment: To increase employment opportunities available to people living in rural areas.

We agree that Thematic Pillar 4: Employment is appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland. Through provision of good social housing that accommodates added home working space current employment can be sustained and wider employment opportunities accessed that may not have been possible in the past due to prohibitive commuting.

b. We agree that the three priority areas for intervention outlined below supporting Thematic Pillar 4: Employment are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland.

- To promote rural prosperity by providing support to non-farming rural enterprises to help increase rural business start-ups, sustainability, and growth.
- To champion the need to address the personal and practical issues which create barriers to employability for our rural dwellers.
- To invest in and develop our rural society

Provision of more housing including social to enable people who can work at home to return to local rural communities.

9. Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity: To improve connectivity between rural and urban areas.

We agree that Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity is appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland.

Through provision of good social housing that accommodates added home working space current employment can be sustained and wider employment opportunities accessed that may not have been possible in the past due to prohibitive commuting.

b. We agree that the four priority areas for intervention outlined below supporting Thematic Pillar 5: Connectivity are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland.

- To support sustainable public transport services between rural areas and urban centres and encourage active and public transport usage that better meets the needs of rural dwellers.
- To support balanced regional development by promoting better connectivity between urban and rural centres.
- To support improved telecommunications infrastructure including high speed broadband making it available to as many people as possible regardless of where they live.
- To reduce barriers to accessing services in rural areas.

10. The five thematic pillars should be prioritised, ranked by priority from 1-5 (with 1 being the highest priority and 5 being the lowest priority) as follows

Rating	Description of Thematic Pillar
4	Thematic pillar 1: Innovation and Entrepreneurship
5	Thematic pillar 2: Sustainable Tourism
3	Thematic pillar 3: Health and Wellbeing
2	Thematic pillar 4: Employment
1	Thematic pillar 5: Connectivity

There is a pillar that we feel is missing and that is Housing. Housing is the cornerstone of building strong communities. The availability and quality of housing impacts directly on people's health and wellbeing, educational attainment, as well as affecting levels of deprivation and crime within a local area. The provision of social housing helps ensure that everyone has an opportunity to access suitable and affordable housing that supports them in their family life and employment opportunities.

11. We agree that the 14 Key Principles outlined below are appropriate for the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland,

- Address the needs of rural communities through the delivery of outcomes-based initiatives which provide value for money and also contribute to the outcomes set out in the draft Programme for Government 2016-21 (PfG);
- Promote the piloting of new and innovative approaches to the challenges facing rural communities.
- Encourage partnership working between Departments, other public sector organisations and the rural community sector.
- Recognise the important role played by the rural community sector and the need to encourage rural community empowerment.
- Encourage the mainstreaming of successful projects and the development of suitable exit strategies.
- Complement other rural initiatives including the Rural Needs Act 2016.
- Be cognisant of the fact that all Departments have responsibilities for rural areas.
- Promote sustainability through support for projects which deliver long term benefits for rural communities.
- Seek to promote equality and good relations in line with the Department's duties under Section 75.
- Seek to complement the aims and objectives of other key Executive policies and strategies including the Draft PfG and the New Decade, New Approach Deal.
- Promote the sharing of information (in line with UK data protection legislation), learning and best practice between organisations.
- Seek to complement the community planning process.
- Recognise opportunities for partnership working on a North/South, East/West or transnational basis; and
- The Framework will seek to use the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework (TRPSI) delivery approach under the wider umbrella of Thematic Pillar 3.

Additionally, we suggest that there is a need to enable provision of access to land and funding for rural social housing homes and grants for renovation. We would also seek additional specialised respite and long-term care and residential units e.g., best practice dementia care accommodation and additional support models and funding to sustain independence and safety at home for rural older persons for as long as possible and other supportive initiatives examples are Shelter NI models to carry out minor repairs and adaptations, home security etc.

12. We wish to comment that much more consideration and commitment must be given to the inclusion of housing and care and support services – without these rural communities face considerable challenges. Provision of both brings much needed investment and employment back to rural communities.
13. Housing is a basic human right and the equality needs for older and disabled persons must be considered. This consideration needs to be applied to the conclusions reached by DAERA in relation to Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland in respect of the Equality and Human Rights Screening Template.

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